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AUTHOR	Clements, Andrea D.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined teaching methods used by homeschooling families. Interviews were conducted with parents from three homeschooling families who used a variety of teaching methods. Researchers collected information on children's ages, number of years of homeschooling, teaching methods, and curriculum choice. Respondents described how they chose their curricula, what other curricula they had previously used, and pros and cons of each teaching method/curriculum. Respondents' teaching methods included completely computerized curriculum done independently by each student, video curriculum in which students watched a videotaped classroom while working in books and workbooks at their seats, parent instruction from an instructor's manual while students worked in books and textbooks at their seats, and self-study books with independent seatwork and tests administered by parents. All three parents had tried other curricula. Curriculum decisions were often made to accommodate weaknesses in the parent teaching as to accommodate children's characteristics. All respondents had talked with other homeschooling parents prior to choosing materials and tried several. None were using the same curriculum or teaching method that they had started with. Positive comments regarding each teaching method and curriculum emphasized the fit with the instructor and the child being taught. Negative comments also emphasized instructor and child fit. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: HOMESCHOOLING METHODS AND CURRICULUM

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Andrea D. Clements

East Tennessee State University

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Variety Of Teaching Methodologies Used By Homeschoolers: Case Studies Of Three Homeschooling Families

Schumm (1998) and Lattibeaudiere (2000) indicate that homeschooling is a rapidly growing approach to education in the United States as is readily apparent to anyone who is associated with homeschooling families. Estimates of the number of children who were homeschooled in the United States as of 1998 were as high as 1.2 million (cite).

Although in the aftermath of social crises such as the shootings at Columbine and other public schools the definition of a homeschooler has broadened somewhat, Schumm (1998) reported that the *typical* homeschool family still tends to have parents in a stable marriage, and be affiliated with a relatively conservative or evangelical protestant denomination. Religiosity has long been associated with homeschooling. Many devoutly religious parents took their children out of public and secular private schools in order to protect them from teaching that undermined their own beliefs and from negative social influences. Although 20 years ago homeschooling was quite rare, it has gained acceptance or at least recognition in many corners of society.

As people have become more familiar with homeschooling, there seems to be less skepticism about it. Perhaps this is due the fact that the research that has been done has largely shown positive results for homeschooling (Diciro, 2000; Duvall, War, Delquadri, & Greenwood, 1997; Klugewicz & Carraccio, 1999; Lattibeaudiere, 2000; Ohman, 2001; Sutton & Galloway, 2000). Those positive results of homeschooling were not only in the area of academic achievement (see, for example, Diciro, 2000; Gray, 1998), but also in the areas of college preparation (Gray, 1998; Lattibeaudiere, 2000), academic and social adjustment (Lattibeaudiere, 2000), higher levels of business ethics (Ohman, 2001), and higher levels of academic engagement (Duvall et al., 1997). Having homeschooled students win the National Spelling Bee two out of the past five years and win the National Geography Bee within the past three years has also served as confirmation of the effectiveness of homeschooling.

Two of the audiences that have been slow to embrace homeschooling have been pediatricians (Klugewicz & Carraccio, 1999) and public school personnel. However a recent study (Balwit, 1997) reported the attempts of one public school teacher attempting to emulate a literate home environment within the classroom in an attempt to have interactions that more closely resemble family interactions in the home. Rather than the typical case, a homeschooling parent attempting to implement public school methodologies, this was just the reverse.

Although many studies have found benefits of homeschooling, most don't address the eclectic nature of the practice of homeschooling. With the rise in popularity of homeschooling has come a proliferation of curricular materials of myriad types. This has served to increase the variability among (and sometimes within) homeschooling families. Homeschooling materials vary in terms of teaching method or how the materials are taught to the child, and curriculum, what materials are used.

Teaching Methods

Much of the decision about what teaching method to use for homeschooling has to do with how much actual time a parent plans to spend in direct teaching activities. This could fall anywhere along a continuum from direct instruction (the most time spent in direct teaching activities) to self-study (the least amount of time in direct teaching activities).

Direct Instruction. Direct instruction within homeschooling would involve the parent directly explaining or demonstrating the material to the child, which is used by virtually all homeschooling parents at some point or another. The parent may go over workbook pages, work examples on the board or paper, and stay with or near the child as his or her work is completed. Parents who primarily use direct instruction typically either 1) want to be very involved with their children's learning; 2) have

children who are very young; 3) have children who have difficulty with the material or staying on task; or 4) the parent simply enjoys teaching.

Self-Study. Older children, more capable children, and more motivated and organized children are often quite successful reviewing material and completing assignments with little or no direct instruction. There are some types of curriculum that lend themselves very well to self-study, while others require more direct instruction. Self-study is quite helpful when teaching multiple children on multiple levels as a child can continue working on his or her own as the parent works one-on-one with another child. Most home schooling parents probably make use of direct instruction, self-study, and other combinations of teaching methods at some point.

Curricula

Although the type of teaching method preferred influences the choice of curriculum and vice versa, there are many other factors that also are typically considered. A basic consideration involves whether parents value a traditional education program, similar to traditional public schooling or prefer something more out of the ordinary, such as un-schooling. The degree to which the content is religious is also of interest to many parents, particularly since so much of the available curriculum comes from evangelical Christian publishers. Several types of curriculum, representing religious and secular perspectives, are textbook-based, literature-based, computer-based, video/satellite, and un-schooling.

Textbook-based. Textbook-based curriculum is most similar to traditional public school curriculum. Textbooks, workbooks, worksheets and tests are used. The amount of direct instruction is at the discretion of the parent. Most of the material from well-known publishers is organized well enough and is complete enough that self-study is possible for a child who reads well.

Literature-based. In literature-based curriculum, rather than using traditional textbooks, subjects are taught from literature (e.g., historical novels, biographies). Generally more time is required for preparation as the teacher must be familiar with the literature and typically must develop some or all of the evaluations. The thought behind the method is that children are exposed to literature and are more naturally interested in stories than in *textbook style* writing.

Computer-based. When using computerized curriculum, subjects are taught through the use of computer software, which may include reading material, instructional videos, mini-lectures, quizzes, testing, and grading. The parent may or may not participate in the instruction. The most popular computerized homeschooling software is set up to do instruction and assessment without any direct instruction (see *Switched-On Schoolhouse*, Alpha Omega Publications, 2000).

Video/satellite. Both video school, in which instruction comes in the form of videotaped classroom teaching, and satellite school, in which classroom teaching is broadcast over a satellite system, involve having students watch a classroom teacher teaching in front of an actual class. Most utilize traditional textbooks. The student is taught by direct instruction primarily, yet it is done by someone besides the parent. The parent is responsible for administering and grading tests and papers, however they would not typically view the videotapes with the children.

Un-schooling. Probably the most controversial type of homeschooling is what has come to be known as un-schooling. This approach typically does not make use of textbooks and tests, but rather *real-life* experiences from which the child is expected to accumulate an understanding of the world. Within an un-schooling paradigm, the boundaries between school and the rest of the child's activities are so blurred that it is impossible to begin to describe teaching methods or curricula for this subset of homeschoolers.

Because of the great variation in the methods and curriculum materials used by homeschoolers, interpretation of research findings about homeschooling is difficult. The focus of this study was to explore not only the varied teaching methods and types of curriculum used by families who homeschool their children, but also how the families made their decisions about methods and

curriculum. A qualitative, case-study approach was used to gather data from three homeschooling families.

Method

Participants

Clinical interviews were held with one parent from each of three homeschooling families who had homeschooled between 3½ and 8½ years and used various teaching methods in their homeschooling. One family of four with two school age children, one family of five with two school age children, and one family of six with two school age children were interviewed. Children ranged in age from 9 to 16 years of age. Each of the three families homeschooled one girl and one boy.

Instrumentation and Procedure

A researcher-constructed questionnaire was used to gather information on ages of homeschooled children, number of years homeschooling, teaching method, and curriculum choice. Participants were as to describe how they had chosen their curriculum, what other curricula, if any, they had used in the past, and to give pros and cons of each teaching method/curriculum used.

Results

Because this was a qualitative, exploratory study only descriptive findings are reported and any discussion of effectiveness of methods is based on the opinion of the participants rather than empirical findings. All participants were informed that this was a research study, that they could decline to participate, and that their name would not be attached to the results.

Within the three studied families, a total of six children were homeschooled. One family (Family 1) had four children (two of school age, 12 and 15 years old), one family (Family 2) had three children (two of school age, 14 and 16 years old), and one (Family 3) had two children (9 and 12 years old). Family 1 had homeschooled for 3½ years after having their children attend public, then secular private, then parochial private schools. Family 2 had homeschooled a total of 8½ years with a 2½-year break during elementary school. Family 3 had homeschooled for 4 years.

The variety of methods used among these three families included completely computerized curriculum done independently by each student, video curriculum in which the students watched a videotaped classroom while working in books and workbooks at their seats, parent instruction from an instructor's manual while students worked with books and textbooks at their seats, and self-study books with independent seatwork and tests administered by the parent (see Table 1). None of the parents used the same curricula.

Table 1
Curricula and Teaching Methods Currently Used

Curriculum	Teaching Method
Saxon Math	Primarily self-study
Switched on Schoolhouse	Computer-based
A Beka Video	Primarily video & seatwork
Rod & Staff	Guided self-study; individualized help

The procedure for the selection of each method was discussed with each family. All three indicated that they had tried other curricula. Current thinking in teacher preparation programs is that using a variety of methods to teach material, specifically tailoring those methods to fit the learning style and aptitude of each child, is considered best practice in public education. Often, but not always, technology is used to individualize instruction. One noteworthy finding was that curriculum decisions were made as often to accommodate weaknesses in the teaching parent as to accommodate characteristics of the children. Two of the parents chose their curriculum because the curriculum was set up in such a way that there was more accountability for material coverage within the curriculum. One of those curricula was computer-based. It includes gates that the child must pass through, such answering all study questions before proceeding to a quiz, and completing all quizzes prior to a test. The second was the video school. The mother whose children use video school indicated that she preferred this because 1) it kept her from having to police her oldest child to keep him on task moving through his schoolwork, and 2) concepts were re-presented year after year, which she found difficult to do because it seemed redundant to her. However, she indicated that she knew it was very necessary as children, particularly young children, learn well through repetition.

As for the process of choosing curriculum, one mother indicated that she had looked through many types of curricula and worked with several before choosing her current curriculum. All three indicated that they had talked with other homeschooling parents prior to choosing materials, and tried several (even if it was for a year or part of a school year). None of the three were still using the same curriculum or teaching method they had used when they began homeschooling.

Positive and negative aspects of each teaching method and curriculum were explored. Some of the positive aspects of the computerized and video school curricula as well as the Saxon Math focused on facility of use for self-study. A positive aspect of Rod and Staff was that it offers a traditional approach with lots of repetition and is Bible-based. The overarching positive comments focused on the fit with the *instructor* and the fit with the children being taught. No mention was made of cost, attractiveness, or other such characteristics that would seem to be taken into consideration when marketing such materials. This isn't to say these characteristics were unimportant; they were just not of primary importance.

Similar findings were discovered in the discussion of negative aspects of curricula. Instructor-fit and the child-fit were also the most often cited negative aspects of curricula. As far as materials viewed as negative from an instructor-fit perspective, those that required a great deal of teacher preparation (such as Bob Jones) or a great deal of teacher oversight (e.g., A Beka, non video, Bob Jones) were seen as negative. Each participant who changed curriculum for child-fit reasons left a less challenging curriculum for a more challenging curriculum. An additional child-fit reason for changing curriculum was for increased repetition.

Discussion

While a limited number of participants were interviewed within this study, several important findings were revealed. Parents take into account instructor and child characteristics when evaluating and choosing curricula and teaching methods for homeschooling. Cost and attractiveness were not included as positive or negative characteristics of any curriculum discussed by the participants. All had changed curriculum and modified teaching methods during their time homeschooling. These factors appear to support the concept that instruction is being individualized, as is recommended as beneficial for any student.

Rigor and repetition were valued by parents, and were cited as reasons for changing curricula. These are not necessarily driving forces within public education currently and may reflect some of the reasons these parents chose to homeschool their children rather than send them to public schools.

Many educators disapprove of an emphasis on repetition (or drill and practice) saying that it decreases student motivation. However, these parents appeared to see it a necessary for their children's learning. There has also been a decline in the rigor of many textbooks over the past several decades (cite), possibly as a way to ensure success for more of the students. There has been a noteworthy rise in grades during the same era. These parents apparently valued that rigor and were willing to change curricula to ensure that their children were appropriately challenged.

It was enlightening to explore how homeschooling parents chose and changed curricula and teaching methods. It appears that through some degree of trial and error, some self-exploration, and consideration of learning styles and abilities of their children, all have chosen and gradually modified their curriculum and methodology to suit themselves and their children.

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